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THE ADVANCE MOVEMENT IN ENGLISH¹

ELMER W. SMITH

Colgate University, Hamilton, New York

We think of the advance movement in English teaching, I presume, as having begun with the organization of the English Council, or at any rate not more than five years prior to that event. The decade preceding might then be called the period of the "reformation." For the last decade of the old century, in which there was much turmoil in the field of English, perhaps the term "historic" period will do; anything antedating that must be "pre-historic." The title seems to fit, for when I turn to a report of the Committee on Composition and Rhetoric, made to the Harvard Overseers, and to an article by Professor Hart of Cornell on "Regents' Diplomas in English," both of which were published in the January number of the *School Review* of 1893, I find such statements as these quoted from students' answers to questions: "We had no instructor in English. I never had any direct training in English Composition. We studied Rhetoric; but only as a theory." Another wrote, "I don't think we average more than five hours a year in written work," adding, "You would almost think that the teachers expected you to know English thoroughly without studying it but very little indeed." And another, "I studied a rhetoric text-book *Thirty Weeks*, of which a good share of the time was spent in studying poetry, also Metaphors, Antithesis, Hyperboles, Similies, and other kinds of sentences." It is easy to grow facetious over such sentences written by college men and women; but our purpose is historical, not literary.

Notwithstanding the pittance of time and the pitiful results, the teachers of these youths had ideals. Let me quote from the commandments prepared by Mr. J. G. Wight, a teacher in the Classical High School, Worcester, Massachusetts, and printed in

¹ A paper read before the National Council of Teachers of English.

the first number of the *School Review* in 1893. Concerning composition writing: "Insist upon daily work in composition. . . . Aim at developing the ability to think clearly, and a facility in writing accurate English. . . . Insist upon correct paragraphing. . . . Let pupils correct one another's themes. . . . Require all corrected compositions to be re-written. . . . Teach clearness and unity, and the common figures of speech. . . . Correct in class a great variety of faulty sentences. . . . At first require short compositions on subjects that cannot be 'looked up,' then longer ones on books read outside of class."

Concerning literature: "Require daily study of some American author. . . . Require much reading in class and in private, to be reported on orally in class. . . . Require committing to memory of beautiful selections. . . . Make a beginning in the cultivation of the literary taste, and of a desire to read only the best. . . . Stimulate the imagination and arouse a liking for the beautiful in literature and nature."

Concerning oral reading: "Devote some portion of each recitation to oral reading. . . . Require reading and reciting from the platform. . . . Require the defining of new words, to enlarge the pupil's vocabulary; old words, to make his knowledge accurate."

Although these commandments came down to us from the dark ages, they seem much like the latest word from Mount Sinai. It is one thing, however, to set up an ideal and another thing to realize it, as we who began our teaching in those far-off days know too well. We then saw these things as through a mist, vaguely. The way had to be laid out, the successive stages in the journey indicated; the steps along the stages, and the method and manner of the steps—all of these had to be determined by experience. It has taken time. What to do, in what order to do it, and by what means, are only now after a quarter of a century being summed up in the report of the Revision Committee on the High-School Syllabus.

The advance movement of which this report is the outcome has been marked by a very distinct effort at co-operation. A certain old gentleman once urged his neighbors to take more interest in public measures. "If we put our heads together," said he, "we

will have a block pavement." Who the old gentleman of the English movement was I do not know, but we have the pavement. Perhaps we simultaneously became conscious that if our dreams were going to come true we must organize to make them come true. This is a new feeling that is creeping into the world's consciousness.

Coming together as a unified body has helped us to see the problem as a unit. We see now that grammar, composition, and literature as separate branches exist each for all and all for each; that expression, oral and written, are one and indivisible, we hope, forevermore; that the classroom, the library, the school stage, the school printing-press, the forensic club, all share alike the responsibility for the co-ordination of the mind and the tongue, and the mind and the hand; and that the insignia worn by the English teacher reads, *E pluribus unum*. She is but one among many teachers all working at the same job, but she is the leader of the many, and her leadership must be respected.

Again and again the attempt has been made to make this natural leadership mean servitude by requiring the English teacher to read the papers from all departments. Back in 1897 Dr. Samuel Thurber hit this practice a blow from the shoulder when he wrote in his five axioms of composition-teaching, "All the teachers of the school should share equally this task of supervising the English writing. I do not see how any teacher, man or woman, can have the effrontery to claim to know good English better than the rest; and I do not see how any teacher can submit to have the drudgery of having several times his share of work thrust upon him." I fancy that for the most part we have freed ourselves from this absurd servitude. If we have not, we should hold it up as the ideal for future English teachers. We may observe, too, that it is altogether probable that "co-operation is no longer to be solely a belligerent virtue."

Out of this spirit of co-operation have grown several things. One of these is the realization that the racial change in the way of looking at things has a significance, I may say perhaps a special significance, for the English teacher. Chesterton has hit off the

new idea in this line, "The whole divine democracy of things." All for one and that one a king, and that one for all and they the people, which came across with the Roman law and the English Puritans, which was applied to the individual units of society and called perfect democracy, is now seen to be a sieve full of holes through which human beings fall without misery to unsavable depths. The new panacea is all for all, the new social doctrine.

This social point of view has revealed several things: first, that man talks before he writes, and writes because he talks, and that he uses both forms of expression because he is a member of a society by which he wishes to make himself understood; secondly, that all the schools can do and all they ought to try to do is to give the boys and girls a real preparation for participating in a real society; thirdly, that the means of accomplishing this end is as important and sacred as the end itself, which is to say that we can prepare them for real things only by having them do real things. So method has come to include real conversation, real speeches, real letters, real articles on real subjects, the reading of real literature; that is, the literature that grows out of the real life they are living. Dried grass is hay; it always has been and always will be very useful for certain purposes with certain kinds of cattle. Green grass is food, too, for the same kinds and for some others, and in the springtime is the natural thing. The fact, too, that it grows in the pasture where all can feed together as long, as little, as much as they please, also helps in the socializing process. Do not understand that I wish to slam the door against either the ancient or the modern classics, but that I wish merely to let down the bars into the green fields of current good writing (if you decline to call it literature).

The fourth result from the social point of view is that, no matter how highly we may refine their sensibilities and how responsive they may be to visions and ideals, unless they know what they are in the world for, and how to make themselves useful in the world, men and women are very foolish human beings. In the effort to avoid withered hands, and withered eyes and ears and tongues, and

to produce human beings set squarely on two good feet which they know how to use, we have introduced a side line of vocational studies. As nearly as we can tell, this well-nigh completes the social circle.

A teacher received the following letter from a fond mother: "My son is a genius: but he doesn't seem inclined to study. Please make him study. In doing so do not use force. We never use force upon him at home, except in self-defense." The English department has had the same kind of an invitation: "Please make everybody like English, but use force only in self-defense." That is the way we have taught the Mexicans to like democracy. Through the new movement we have come to see that in the very nature of things not all pupils will like English, in all or any of its branches; that 50 per cent and probably more of the boys and girls in our high schools will not like literature, nor will they enjoy artistic expression in any form. They will be the workers of the world, with their minds upon things divinely democratized, instead of upon art. We must win as many as we can to the life beautiful. But force will not win them. We must therefore make the bait tempting. In the interest of the art of tempting we have greatly liberalized our program so that each fisherman and fishermaid may use the bait best adapted to his or her peculiar fish, for there are blind fish and deaf fish, and fish with other withered members. Hence we have extended reading-lists from which to choose, and widely varying methods by which to teach expression, and a scheme of attractive activities, such as dramatization, journalism, speech-making, parliamentary drill, and all the rest, all in the interest of popularizing and socializing English study. And the function of self-defense, in the Empire State at least, is taken care of by the state.

Measure the change in English teaching commercially if you like, and permit a personal reference. Some twenty-odd years ago, I was summoned from a suburban city to Boston by one of the leading agencies to meet a certain principal from New York State. Before the interview the fatherly manager advised the youth about what to expect. And he remarked that if the candidate were a teacher of Greek he might expect to get about so and so, naming a

moderate figure which passed for a pretty good salary in that day. "But," he said, "as an English teacher you cannot get more than, say, so and so," and he named a figure some \$500 less. There was no reason to question his knowledge of the facts. Today the English teacher no longer runs in the ruck as a matter of course. The qualified English teacher is as likely as any other to be in the lead in the salary list.

The new movement, too, has been in the direction of a standardized requirement. Every good school has been eager to do as much as any better school, and the machinery which the advance has developed has furnished a means of knowing what the best are doing. Hence we have automatically worked toward a standard. The same ambition and the same means look toward a standardization of methods and attainments. In this direction, however, the message from the front is the nominal report of progress: first, toward fixing a definite standard of attainment for the end of the elementary course and each step leading thereto; secondly, a definite standard for the end of the high-school course and each of the intervening stages; and thirdly, a definite standard of equipment for the would-be teacher of English. The ambitious project is looking wistfully over into the college preserve, but has not yet been invited in.

The relief from written work by the substitution of oral work and the proper balancing of the two, and the testing out of methods for oral work and voice culture are matters that are hopefully active. There are still good souls, who fancy they are making history, who would rather go to the stake than admit that they are wrong. In all this forward movement, however, we have been singularly free from the querulous nonconformist crusader, who, agreeing with no man, claims to speak for every man. It has been for the most part a bloodless revolution.

The advance movement has been the old story of liberty, equality, and fraternity over again, and in nearly the same order. After Yale, Harvard, and the College Entrance Board had chained all English teaching to certain precepts of higher criticism, English teachers found that they were expected to have heads but not

hearts, and they claimed the right to feel as well as to think. They declared their right to break away from the facts of history, philology, biography, and science, and to enter as they chose the kingdom of beautiful things. It was not, however, what a brilliant writer calls the masculine liberty, equality, and fraternity of the public house, where men meet together but never do anything, but a liberty, equality, and fraternity that had a pretty definite program, or had at least worked out one. And we still profess to be in favor of home rule, although we are working more or less rapidly toward a central government. That is paradox number one.

Paradox number two is that while manifesting a growing respect for facts we also manifest a tendency to get away from mere facts. We no longer make tolerance of facts an excuse for not bothering about them. We are eager to know all the facts that scientific inquiry can bring to light about the conditions under which English is taught or may be taught. We no longer go out with an inspiration, a deep breath, and our eyes on the heavens, like a painter, poet, or prophet, although our work in a way partakes of the nature of the work of each. We still have a tenderness for revolution, we admit, but nevertheless we do give way before a decent array of facts. In this combination, perhaps, lies our highest hope of attaining the temple of truth.

Out of co-operation, then, have grown the processes of socialization, popularization, and standardization. While these processes are completing themselves, we need to beware of polarization, the effect produced upon the plates of a battery by a deposit from the gases which tends greatly to weaken the current. What we shall need for years to come is the force of a strong current. Feeble spirits like to live in the past. The English movement has the virility of the forward look.

Someone has said, "All reforms would be easy were it not for the folks." The reform in English teaching would not have been possible except for the "folks" who have been willing to get together and thresh out their problems. The National Council has accelerated the reform immeasurably. Organized in response to violent criticism by some educational agnostics, with a few Christians

following at a distance, who cursed the whole English business as a barren fig tree, it has seen in its five short years of existence a transformation of public interest in its interests, the development of a high respect for its opinions, and the arousing of a large hopefulness in the outcome of its labors. Happily named and happily led, it has been instrumental in helping the great body of English teachers really to occupy their domain, and bids fair through the agencies which it has set in motion to make of the domain a well-governed kingdom.